

May 30, 2006

Senate Bill 971/972 and HR 3

From: Concerned Citizens for Saugatuck Dunes State Park

Good morning. Thank you for listening to my testimony. My name is David Swan. Along with my bride, Alison Swan, we founded Concerned Citizens for Saugatuck Dunes State Park.

Our organization believes Senate Bills 971 and 972 have been strengthened by assigning final approval to the Natural Resource Commission for any size land sale and/or transfer, and further adding an additional step of legislative approval for sales/transfers over 100 acres or 15% of any state park whichever is smaller. Allowing final approval to the NRC simply restores a process that was eliminated without good reason under a former administration.

This is smart legislation that helps protect our natural resources without unnecessarily hampering the Department of Natural Resources. We would prefer if the bills included language for the permanent protection of lake frontage and designated natural and wilderness areas. Everyone can agree that such land is irreplaceable and therefore priceless. Selling and/or transferring any publicly held lands must never be taken lightly and must always be pursued with long term consequences in mind. We must take the long view.

These bills and the accompanied debates and conversation have certainly reinvigorated park advocates, land use experts, and the citizen owners so that we will forever be diligently watching our treasured landscape to ensure the public trust is never violated.

I'd like to put forth two examples of why our organization feels strongly that Senate Bills 971 and 972 should include broader oversight and approval to include the NRC as well as the public on all state land sales and swaps within and adjacent to state parks and recreation areas.

- 1) In 2001 two local municipalities, Laketown Township and the City of Holland, applied for a small land swap within the Saugatuck Dunes State Park. They were interested in building a water treatment facility within the park – a common enough request of our state park system by utilities. The swap would have been a net gain of acreage for the park including a parcel of particular significance. On paper and with little review this could have appeared an appropriate land swap. The proposal however, had the potential for significant long term harm to this jewel in the state park system. It would have greatly altered the park and how it was used by the citizen owners. Had our organization not had the opportunity to express our concerns to Rodney Stokes, then Chief Parks and Recreation Bureau, Paul Yauk, Viki Anthes, and others within the DNR I fear the requested land

swap would have been approved. In this instance it was the citizen owners and users of the Park system who educated those ultimately held accountable for the well being of the parks. In this instance it was the public citizenry who had the deep knowledge necessary for making the proper recommendation on a proposed land transfer. It was the voice of the public – given the opportunity – who protected a vital natural resource, an important resource to the local economy, from great harm.

- 2) The history of Saugatuck Dunes State Park is a prime example of why it is vitally necessary to include the public in land use decisions. In 1977 the Michigan Department of Corrections acquired 549 acres (where we now have Saugatuck Dunes State park). They needed 44 acres for a medium security prison and gave the remaining 505 acres to the DNR to be used as a low-intensity State park. Near the same time the state was able to purchase 415 acres known as the Luther-Uhl tract – this is now the Saugatuck Dunes Natural Area.

The preliminary park plan was presented to the Saugatuck and Laketown Boards in January 1980. It called for an intensive-use park which would provide a beachhouse complex, boat access, and parking lot for 1,500 cars. It did not rule out the creation of an off-road-vehicle scramble area. The intensive-use zone was to be centered in the Luther-Uhl tract (now a natural area).

The public reaction to the preliminary plan was immediate and strongly negative.

The *local citizen's group* West Allegan Dunes coalition gave voice to the near unanimous local opposition to the DNR plan. At the formal public hearing the coalition called for complete preservation of the Luther-Uhl tract and low intensity use of the adjacent lands, as well as a ban against ORV in the park. It also called for the DNR to create a citizens' advisory committee to work with it in planning the park.

A few weeks following the public hearing the DNR spoke with local municipalities and requested their help in establishing a Saugatuck Dunes Advisory Committee.

This committee worked for nearly two years creating the finalized and accepted Saugatuck Dunes State Park master plan. The theme of nature study strongly influenced the planning of the committee and the DNR. Family camping, a standard feature of almost all Michigan State Parks, was specifically eliminated in order to reduce total user impact on the park. The Luther-Uhl tract was designated for complete preservation as a legally defined natural area – this area became the focal point of the plan. The plan also called for the permanent ban against ORV use in the park and a prohibition against expansion of the prison onto lands acquired for park use.

On January 14, 1982 the Michigan Natural Resources Commission unanimously approved the master plan for Saugatuck Dunes State Park.

As State Senator, Patricia Birkholz wrote in a 1982 article explaining the process (she herself was on the Saugatuck Dunes Advisory Committee),

"Saugatuck Dunes State Park *is truly a 'citizen's park.'* It will be a park which reflects the majority view of local citizens not only in concept but also in the details of much of the design. The process by which the master plan for

Saugatuck Dunes State park became a reality may well provide a model by which citizens and government units can work together to solve a variety of problems.”

Members of the Committee, the citizen owners of the Michigan State Park system request and demand a voice in the decision making process that effects our beloved landscape. This is not an unwieldy request. It can be done and it has been done. It has been done to great benefit to future generations of park users.

We, the more than 1,000 members of Concerned Citizens for Saugatuck Dunes State Park, are requesting you set the bar *very* high on all land use decisions. We are requesting you strengthen Senate Bills 971 and 972 to include a proper approval process involving the citizen owners of the parks.

Thank you for the hard work you all do on behalf of the citizenry. I appreciate it.